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**D.C.'s imperiled safety net: legal aid groups**

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THERE ARE few entities spared in the [budget proposed this month by Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D)](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/01/AR2010040102346.html). Hundreds of city employees might lose their jobs, pay has been frozen, and countless programs are being asked to do more with less. Everyone is hurting.

The same is true for many District residents. Unemployment in the poorest parts of the city has reached nearly 30 percent. Many households are struggling to forestall foreclosure. People who have never before relied on public assistance desperately need it now.

That is why the administration and city council should reconsider proposed funding cuts for legal aid organizations. Such groups help represent the homeowner who is on the brink of losing a house or the tenant who may be days away from living on the streets. They also, in many instances, serve as liaisons for people in need of food stamps, unemployment benefits or temporary shelter. They find help for the battered woman and the sick child. They are, in short, gateways to a number of services already provided by government but which many residents would not know existed or would have no clear idea how to obtain.

Legal aid budgets have shrunk even as the demand for their services has soared. Revenue from lawyers' trust accounts has plummeted due to low interest rates. Law firms, traditionally big donors of time and money, have cut back. And now the District proposes to prune its funding by roughly 40 percent. During the most recent fiscal year, the District provided $2.9 million to the city's legal aid groups. Mr. Fenty has proposed slashing that to $1.8 million for the coming year. The $1.1 million cut is tiny in proportion to the city's $5.3 billion budget, but it is huge for the legal aid groups and the clients that rely on them.